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ABSTRACT

This study examines the ability of students to develop empathy for peoples of the past and to avoid the belief that people in the past were no different than today. The paper reports the results of a year-long qualitative investigation of fourth and fifth graders' attempts to understand the values, attitudes, and beliefs of people in the past. The study was conducted in two classrooms in a suburban community near Cincinnati (Ohio). Although some students initially attributed past behavior to deficiencies of intelligence or education, most came to understand that people in the past had different outlooks than people of today. The paper concludes that the active attempts by students to make sense of the different behaviors and attitudes they encountered in history should suggest that meaningful historical perspective-taking is not beyond the ability of fourth- and fifth-graders, and that they benefit from sustained attention to the topic. Contains 27 references. (EH)

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Did the Devil just run out of juice?

Historical perspective–taking among elementary students

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Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the

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Abstract

The ability to take the perspective of people in history—the see actions and events as they would have appeared at the time—is a key aspect of historical understanding. This study reports the results of a year long, qualitative investigation of fourth and fifth graders' attempts to understand the values, attitudes, and beliefs of people in the past. Although some students initially attributed past behavior to deficiencies of intelligence or education, most came quickly to understand that people in the past had different outlooks than people They understood, for example, that fashions that seem unusual now were considered attractive in the past. When it came to more fundamental differences in beliefs or values, students also recognized that people in the past were different, but had difficulty accounting for those differences. Many could not quite accept they would have shared such outlooks if they were alive in the past, and only occasionally did students place them in a broader cultural perspective. Their active attempts to make sense of these differences, though, suggests that meaningful historical perspective–taking is not beyond the ability of fourth and fifth graders, and that they benefit from sustained attention to the topic.

The ability to take the perspective of people in history—to see actions and events as they would have appeared at the time—is a key aspect of historical understanding. This study reports the results of a year long, qualitative investigation of fourth and fifth graders' attempts to understand the values, attitudes, and beliefs of people in the past. Over the course of the year, most students came to understand that people in the past had different outlooks than people today, but it was more difficult for them to place those perspectives in broader historical contexts. The research reported here describes students' accomplishments in trying to understand past perspectives, the obstacles they faced, and the instructional implications of each.

Background to the Study

Interpreting historical actions and events exclusively through a twentieth century lens—as though people in the past were no different than today—is known as *presentism*. To understand why people acted as they did, students must move beyond their own perspective as members of twentieth century Western culture. Making sense of the past requires a recognition of how people at the time viewed their circumstances, evaluated their options, and made decisions, and this involves understanding how their perceptions were shaped by their values, beliefs, and attitudes. Without such understanding, many historical actions may seem senseless—as though they were irrational, rather than consistent with a view of the world was different than people hold today. This ability to take the perspective of people in the past is a critical attribute of meaningful historical understanding (Downey, 1995; Levstik and Barton, in press; Seixas, 1995).

This ability—sometimes known as *empathy*—has received a great deal of attention among British educators (Ashby and Lee, 1987; Dickinson and Lee, 1978, 1984; Lee, 1978; Portal, 1987, 1990; Shemilt, 1984).[1] In recent decades, empathy has figured heavily

in the teaching of history in England, and has constituted a key component of curriculum innovations there (Boddington, 1980). At the same time, the topic has led to considerable academic debate. Several scholars note that the concept has no clearly agreed–upon meaning: while some educators think of it as a purely cognitive skill, others see it as a means of identifying with historical actors or developing an affective response to their situations (Boddington, 1980, Knight, 1989). And Jenkins (1991) argues that the educational emphasis on empathy is misplaced, since we cannot help but understand the world through our own, present–day interpetions. Focusing on empathy in history, he argues, is both futile and misguided.

Historical empathy has received less attention in North America. Although the recent national standards in history identify the ability to describe the past "through the eyes and experiences of those who were there" as an essential component of historical comprehension (National History Standards Project 1994, p. 23), perspective–taking has neither garnered much attention nor figured prominently in policy debates over these standards. Perhaps because of empathy's controversial status in Britain—particularly its affective connotations—educators in North America have generally employed the term *perspective–taking* and have emphasized its cognitive nature (for example, Downey, 1995; Levstik and Barton, in press; Seixas, 1995). Research on the topic here is limited to two unpublished studies (Barton, 1993; Downey, 1993, 1995).

British researchers, on the other hand, have studied children's perspective–taking abilities more extensively, and have developed systems of classifying students' thinking in the area. While their typologies differ in some respects, both Shemilt (1984) and Ashby and Lee (1987) describe a contiuum which ranges from students who see the actions of people in the past as stupid or unintelligible, up to those who place such actions in their social and cultural context. Ashby and Lee are careful to emphasize that theirs is a logical hierarchy, not a developmental one: they arrange students' thinking along a spectrum of historical adequacy, rather than arguing that students pass through these stages as they

grow older or become more intellectually mature. They further note that students' performances are neither stable nor fixed. When working with familiar content, for example, students are likely to perform at higher levels, and group discussions often result in students' movement up or down the scale.

Knight (1989), on the other hand, takes issue with descriptions of empathy which proceed solely from the logical considerations of the discipline of history. He argues that educators need to focus instead on the psychology of the learner, in order better to understand how they make sense of the perspectives of people in the past. Knight notes that such attention may reveal that empathy is not a unitary construct for children (as stages derived from adult thought imply), but a complex combination of skills. Similarly, Downey (1995) argues that at least five different aspects of students' understanding must be taken into consideration in examining their perspective–taking ability. The present study takes a similar position: rather than establishing a set of set of stages of thought, it examines how students made sense of the perspectives of people in the past, and how their thinking developed over the course of the year.

Design of the Study

I conducted this research in the classrooms of Amy Leigh and Tina Reynolds, two teachers recommended to me for their innovative and activity–oriented instruction. Amy's was a combined fourth– and fifth–grade classroom, while Tina's consisted solely of fourth graders.[2] Their school was near Cincinnati, in a long–established suburban community consisting primarily of stable residential neighborhoods. Amy's and Tina's students reflected the racial and socioeconomic makeup of the community: all were of Euroamerican descent, and most came from middle or upper–middle socioeconomic backgrounds; a large portion had parents with college degrees and jobs in professional or managerial fields. Slightly more than ten percent of the students, on the other hand, lived in the community's

small public housing projects, and thus the range of socioeconomic backgrounds in the classes was wide. The overall academic achievement of students in the school was extraordinarily high, and the school scored among the top ten in the state in each of the first three years of the state's new testing program (the year of this study and the two preceding years). Both Amy and Tina described their classrooms as including students with a range of academic abilities, but they considered most to be average or above average academically.

Amy's and Tina's teaching provided extensive opportunities for insight into their students' historical thinking. Both considered themselves interested in history, and both devoted a great deal of time to the topic—history projects and discussions, in fact, often spilled over into other times of the day. Neither used textbooks. Instead, they conveyed content through tradebooks and their own explanations, combined with student–centered projects, role plays and simulations, and open–ended writing assignments. Their teaching accorded well with the general principles of effective subject–matter instruction identified by Prawat (1989) and Good and Brophy (1994). Rather than attempting to cover a large amount of miscellaneous information and expecting students to remember isolated facts, for example, Amy and Tina took time to plan sustained instruction in a few topics which they considered important. In addition, Amy and Tina consistently engaged in interactive scaffolding of students' learning. Rarely did they tell students exactly what to do or how to do it; rather, they used probing questions to help students develop and improve their own assignments. Both Amy and Tina also encouraged class and small–group discussion, and expected students to respond thoughtfully to their questions and to each other.

Students in these classrooms engaged in a variety of instructional activities related to several historical topics. At the beginning of the year they collected information on their personal histories and developed timelines and presentations about their lives. They also spent several weeks working in groups to investigate changes in aspects of everyday life (sports, work, household technology, cars, etc.) through the use of books, artifacts, and

interviews. Students also studied topics such as the Salem witch trials, the French and Indian War, daily life in the Colonial Era, the American Revolution, and immigration to the United States near the beginning of this century. Studying most of these topics included the use of tradebooks, primary sources, role plays and simulations, presentations to classmates, and written compositions.[3]

In order to investigate students' historical thinking, I used three principal techniques—interviews with students (both formal semi–structured interviews and informal discussions), classroom observation and participation (including frequent discussions with their teachers regarding what students knew and were able to do), and analysis of students' written assignments. During the formal interviews, I showed students a series of pictures from American history, asked them to put them in order and to talk about the reasons for their placement, and then asked a series of questions about their understanding of history and about what they had done in class during the year.[4]

In addition to interviews, I observed extensively in each classroom; doing so allowed me to ask much more specific questions and provided insight into how students' responses related to what they had heard or read in class—thus allowing me to separate the way information had been presented to them from their descriptions during interviews. Another advantage of participant observation was that it allowed me to observe students in a much wider range of contexts than interviews alone could have done. Rather than seeing only their responses to my artificial stimuli in interviews, I was able to watch and talk with students as they engaged in their everyday classroom activities. Because students engaged in so many group projects, and because Amy and Tina actively encouraged open–ended, thoughtful discussion of topics, my presence in the classroom provided me with innumerable opportunities to record informal and spontaneous comments by students.[5] I observed on sixty–three occasions—beginning in August and continuing until March (the last time during the year when formal instruction was devoted to history)—for a total of approximately ninety hours.[6]

In addition to analyzing fieldnotes and interview transcripts, I read a total of 278 written compositions that students produced as part of their regular classroom instruction. Both Amy and Tina gave frequent written assignments in history; most importantly, since these assignments were designed to prepare students for the state's assessment program—which included writing portfolios and open–ended questions in history—they were not of the traditional "fill in the blank" or "answer the questions at the end of the chapter" variety. Instead, assignments usually asked students to draw conclusions supported by evidence (for example, "How has the United States changed over the last 200 years?") or to put themselves in the place of people in history (for example, by writing a letter to a magistrate in Salem protesting a family member's innocence of witchcraft). The primary advantage of analyzing students' writing was that it provided insight into the ideas of students who did not talk frequently during class. Since some students repsonded more frequently in class than others, reading students' compositions enabled me to make sure that relying on more talkative students had not substantially biased my conclusions.[7]

I drew conclusions from these data through a process of analytic induction. After completing the classroom observations, I scanned fieldnotes, interview transcripts, and student compositions in order to identify an initial set of broad coding categories; these categories were based on the aspects of historical thinking identified by Seixas (1995), on the preliminary impressions I developed during fieldwork, and on emerging patterns in the data. I then subjected the data to a more systematic content analysis, in which I categorized units of data according to these initial categories, many of which were broken down, combined, or added to during the course of coding. I analyzed the coded data using means sometimes referred to as *cross–case analysis* and *constant comparison*: I grouped the data from different students responding to the same questions or tasks, identified patterns or regularities occurring in the data, and then looked for evidence of these patterns (including a systematic search for negative or discrepant evidence) across different situations, tasks, and interviews.

This resulted in a set of descriptive generalizations about students' thinking, which I then combined into broader analytic domains; I used these patterns to develop the materials and probing questions used in the final set of interviews with students, and I asked Amy and Tina (and in some cases, students) for their feedback on my observations. (The resulting data were coded and analyzed in the same way described above.) In the following section, I discuss the results related to one of these broad analytic domains—students' attempts to take the perspective of people in the past. I present each of the major generalizations that I identified, and provide representative evidence (including negative examples) from a variety of sources of data.

Results

Students in this study appeared to have given little previous thought to how the perspectives of people in the past differed from their own, but over the course of the year they had the opportunity to consider the issue in several contexts. In some respects, their ability to consider the outlook of people in the past developed rapidly, as they came quickly to understand that attitudes and beliefs have changed over time. Most students, however, continued to have difficulty fully understanding how people's beliefs could have been so different from their own, or to understand how those beliefs were part of a larger social and cultural context.

Initial ideas on past perspectives

During the first set of interviews, students rarely mentioned ways in which values, attitudes, or beliefs were different in the past. When I explicitly asked how people were different, students almost always described changes in clothes, buildings, or technology. I often rephrased the question by asking, "If someone from a long time ago walked into the room right now, do you think they'd mainly be *like* us, or a lot *different* than us?" This

rephrasing, however, usually did not improve the depth of responses; Dwayne, for example, answered, "If they danced, they'd probably do different dances." Although students had impressive amounts of historical knowledge and understanding in other areas (Barton 1994, 1995), this was a topic they appeared not to have thought about before.

As students began to discuss historical information in class, they were frequently asked to explain why people did things differently. Near the beginning of the year, Tina observed that most students regarded the actions of people in the past as either inexplicable or stupid. After a field trip to a local cemetery, for example, her class discussed different forms of grave markers—particularly the fact that some stones were set in the ground, while others extended vertically. Students thought the lower stones must be designed to make mowing easier, and concluded that people in the past were too stupid to know they could lay them that way. She suggested that people ten or twenty years from now might consider some of the things the students themselves do stupid, but she commented later that "they weren't getting that." (She also noted that students were oblivious to the fact that it was not primarily newer stones which were set low to the ground.) Tina reported that some students even thought that people in the past *realized* they were being "old–fashioned," and that people would one day do things more sensibly.

Students' encounter with the names of people in the past led to similar observations. Those in Amy's classroom noted that many surnames on gravestones were the same as their own but spelled differently, and they concluded that this was because people in the past didn't know how to spell.[8] Similarly, when asked why they thought people used different given names than today, Angie suggested (to a classmates' agreement) that "they didn't know how to pronounce that many names." She went on to explain that in the past, people didn't go to school, and so didn't know all the letters—and since they didn't know the letters, they couldn't pronounce them. Jeremy reached a similar conclusion during an interview. He suggested that a picture of a building with the word "Lexington" on it had to be taken recently because a long time ago "they probably didn't

know how to spell 'Lexington' that well"; later in the interview, he added that somebody from the past "wouldn't know how to say some words, like 'Lexington,' they probably wouldn't know how to say that."

Moving beyond initial conceptions

Early in the school year, many students developed more sophisticated ideas,a nd most began to realize that people in the past did not think they were being "old–fashioned" but that people always see themselves as "normal" or "in style." During an interview, for example, Nichole commented on how she thought modern cars were prettier than older ones, but added, "Well, I don't know, back then they might have thought that those cars are better than now because they're used to their cars, and they were into that style." Similarly, during a project in class Rhiannon had been looking at pictures of old swimming suits (that resembled dresses), and she wrote in her notes, "I would be imbarased if I had to go the pool or lake with a dress on."[9] I asked her later if she really thought it would have been embarrassing; at first she said it would have, but then noted, "Well, not really, if everybody else was wearing them."

A picture of a girl bathing in a sink in a turn–of–the–century tenement (Freedman, 1980) inspired considerable discussion. Several students were shocked by how dirty it seemed; Kenny, though, pointed out that it would have seemed clean to them even though it doesn't to us, and also noted that if they walked into one of our houses, they might think it was "weird."[10] Within a few weeks of the beginning of the school year, whenever a student referred to something as "old–fashioned" or as being otherwise deficient, other students automatically pointed out that it would not have seemed so at the time. As Jean wrote in a composition about the way people dressed in the past, "If they came in [here] we would think that they dress strangely because we now wear jeans, hat and a shirt. But they would think we were strange as well."

One particularly clear explanation of how perceptions change over time came in an interview with Amber and Jeremy. In the following excerpt, they explain how music perceived one way in the past is thought of differently today, and how attitudes toward today's music will change in the future:

Amber: Well, the people back then probably would have thought that their music was like, some of that music was like rock–and–roll to them, but now rock–and–roll to us is a lot different cause it's a lot louder, and their music is just—like in the sixties, like "Stand by You" and stuff, and we have different kinds of songs.

Interviewer: So why do you think that's changed?

Amber: People are probably just not interested in that kind anymore.

[...]

Jeremy: I was thinking, maybe rock–and–roll to them a long time ago was probably like jazz to us.

Interviewer: What do you mean?

Jeremy: Cause all their rock–and–roll was real slow, and sad, and that would be more like jazz to us, or blues songs [...] And rock–and–roll to us would probably be like rap to them.

Interviewer: Oh, that's real interesting; so

Jeremy: Rock–and–roll's really wild, and their rock–and–roll, they probably thought it was really wild to them.

Interviewer: So what do you think it will be like ten or twenty years from now?

Jeremy: Wilder.

Interviewer: You think so?

Amber: Probably a little bit wilder than it is now.[11]

During the course of the year, two topics in particular prompted students to examine differences in attitudes more closely—the role of women in society, and the belief in

witches. Although not a sustained area of study, the topic of women's role in society came up several times throughout the year, and Amy and Tina explained how the cultural expectations, not simply the outward behavior of men and women, differed from today. Students' comments during interviews and class discussion indicated that many of them understood the influence of these differing expectations. In explaining to me what he had learned from a guest speaker who had portrayed a nineteenth–century woman, Kenny said, "It was improper to not have a hat on, or have a long dress on, because it would be like—now ladies wear short skirts, up past the knee—and if you saw a lady's ankle, it was like [makes a gasping noise], 'I saw her ankle!'" Similarly, Susan pointed out, "And it was very bad for women to wear shorts, or jean shorts, or like anything like what a man would wear, like overalls or something, and that, women should always wear a long skirt or a long dress." After Susan made a similar comment in class one day, Amy asked whether she thought a woman would have been punished for wearing pants; Susan explained that it didn't have anything to do with punishment, that it just wouldn't have happened. Both Susan and Kenny (with his gasp) recognized that it was the expectation of what women should do, not just a style of clothing, that was different.

Several students also pointed to the importance of attitudes in determining the kind of work expected of women in the past. Kenny noted that "the men thought that the women were supposed to sit home, take care of the children, cook, clean," and Brandon explained that "men, they thought women weren't important back then, they sorta just thought women were a lot of dumbos, and alls they could do is wash clothes at home, and men thought that was all they were good for." Susan also pointed out that "men just didn't like women and they didn't think that women were allowed to do things, and they thought that women had to do everything at home like working, like cooking, and laundry, and everything, and cleaning; they thought that they just couldn't do anything, cause they were just not manly enough." Jenny also explained that "the men thought the women couldn't do anything but cook."

Students' most extensive opportunity to explore differences in beliefs arose in their study of the Salem witch trials. Both Amy and Tina emphasized that people in Salem believed strongly in witches, and they explained the kinds of evidence people at the time considered evidence of witchcraft. Both also explained that it was part of their general outlook on life to blame witches for disease or mishaps,and that people who violated other aspects of their beliefs were particularly likely to be accused of witchcraft.

Many students demonstrated their understanding of these issues during class activities. In developing a list of evidence to listen for during a simulated trial, for example, one group of jurors listed items such as marks on the body, not being able to say the ten commandments, and being able to float; in discussing the verdict after the evidence had been presented, many students based their decision on the same kinds of evidence. Students also demonstrated this perspective–taking ability in their written compositions. In writing letters to magistrates protesting the innocent of relatives, most explained that the lack of moles, ability to say the ten commandments, regular church attendance, and the inability to float should be taken as evidence of innocence. Charles, for example, wrote,

> I know Sarah is not guilty of witch craft because she goes to church every Sunday. that means she isn't a witch because witches believe in bad stuff and Church is good. Also she doesn't float. Witch float because the people of Masschusetts believe the spirts hold them up. Sarah is [illegible]. The next thing is that Sarah reads the bible every night. The Bible is like going to Church. It is good to read the Bible because God's name is in it. Witches don't like God."

These students did not look for evidence that they themselves considered convincing, but identified what would have convinced people at the time.

Limitations in students' understanding

The development of students' understanding of the perspectives of people in the past was no simple or uniform matter. The recognition that perspectives change and that

people in the past considered themselves normal continued to coexist with the belief that people in the past were not as intelligent as people today. Although attributions of differences in intelligence were most common at the beginning of the year, they continued to occur periodically. Students in the following interview (in February), for example, explained that although people in the past may have had intelligence, they were unwilling to "think" about things:

Interviewer: What other things have changed over time?

Allen: I was thinking, like technology. We have, well, for one thing, we, back in these days when they're protesting, they didn't like each other; if somehow, they were really smart back then, if they could make computers back then—but they couldn't find it, find the brains, kind of.

Interviewer: What do you mean?

Allen: Some people could have been highly intelligent, but not find it, but now we've found the intelligence, and we bring it out, like they kind of knew they had intelligence, but they weren't willing to go in and

Robert: Really think.

Allen: Yeah.

Robert: Just, they wanted to just

Allen: Let other people work on it.

Interviewer: So you think people were different a long time ago?

Allen: Yeah, cause now we've found our intelligence, and we're, we brought it out, and we're thinking of it, and look what it does, it makes computers; the mind is a wonderful thing.

While discussing the Salem witch trials later in the same interview, those students made a similar point about people's unwillingness to think:

Interviewer: Why do you think back then they believed in witches and now people don't?

Robert: Seems like they don't really think about it a lot.

Allen: They don't like, list the possibilities, and just think about it. I mean, say, I mean, "Is this really smart?" Because it couldn't have been, like they could have thought about it and said, "Well, you're right, because we thought about it"; they didn't, but then afterwards we thought about it and said, this just can't be.

Other students also failed to place themselves completely in the perspective of people at the time of the witch trials. One group of jurors decided they would listen for factors other than witchcraft that might explain the evidence against the accused; when I asked whether they were trying to decide what they themselves would consider convincing evidence or what people at the time would have thought, they seemed surprised by the questions, and said they didn't know. Similarly, during one discussion Tonya couldn't understand how a particular woman could have been convicted because "they just had all that flimsy stuff, like [not being able to say] the Ten Commandments." Some students in their compositions also took issue with the reasonableness of the evidence, rather than its existence. One student wrote, "My wife is not a witch. maybe she is different from you, but it's not her fault...We don't deserve to be treated like pigs, just because we don't have money." Similarly, Rusty explained that "there are no such things as witches. Maybe he or she sinks or floats or maybe he or she escapes from [illegible] hanging. What does that prove? Nothing! You float no matter what anyway because you have air in your body."

These students certainly understood what kind of evidence people looked for in accusations of witchcraft, but were unwilling or unable to accept its reasonableness; they thus thought the way to convince someone of a person's innocence was to protest the meaning of the evidence. One of the clearest examples was in Darren's composition, in which he wrote in the form of a dialogue between a convicted witch and her executioner:

> "Why do I deserve to be hung? I didn't do anything." "Of course you have." "How can you prove for me to be guilty?" "I don't have to, court already did." "But they're all wrong I tell you they're all wrong!" "Well, then why can't you say the ten commandments?" "Because I don't know them!" "Well then that proves that your a witch." "Well not everybody has to know the ten commandments and some people might not want to know the ten commandments." [...] "What about that mole on you cheek?" "Anybody can have a mole or a freckle or some kind of a mark without being a witch."[12]

One group of boys got into an extended discussion about why people did not stop believing in witches when they learned to read; Donny was convinced that if they read the Bible, and saw that it did not say that people who were lazy were possessed by the devil, they would simply stop believing it. Trying to probe this assertion, I asked his group why they thought people believed in witches, and they said that the ministers told them; I asked if they thought their parents also told them, and they thought they did; I asked if they thought everyone else in the town would have believed in witches, and they agreed they would have. Thinking that I had set the students up to recognize that such beliefs were not easily shaken, I then asked if they thought people would have just stopped believing in witches if they read something different in the Bible; Donny (preempting other students' chance to respond) remained convinced that they would.

Student's limited ability to remove themselves from their own set of beliefs was also apparent when I asked them, near the end of the year, if they thought that in the future people would think anything they believed didn't make sense. Nearly every student agreed that there would be such changes, yet they had trouble coming up with specific examples. Most pointed to the impact of changing technology. Amber, for example, thought people in the future might not understand "the way that we get around places, like walk and ride bikes, they might not, bikes might go out of style in the future," and Kenny added, "Because maybe they'll, they'll have something where they just have to push a button and

they'll be wherever they want to be, and they'll be, 'Gosh, why would they take all the energy to walk up to a store or something, or ride a bike or something, instead of just pushing a button and be in there?" Several students independently suggested that people in the future will probably have flying cars and won't be able to understand why we used the kind of cars we have now. Others pointed to the fact that fashion would continue to change, and thus our ideas about what looks good wouldn't seem to make sense.[13]

When I pushed students to try to go beyond technology and think of beliefs or attitudes today that might not make sense to people in the future, they had difficulty identifying any. Some could not think of any present beliefs that wouldn't make sense, while those who did venture suggestions sometimes gave examples of beliefs that they themselves did not hold. Sean mentioned Elvis: "People still think that he's alive, and maybe in the future people will get over him, and they won't even care about him." Similarly, in the following interview Allen and Robert suggest several beliefs that will change in the future, none of which they themselves apparently believe:

Robert: Probably believed in some kind of monsters, like witches.

Allen: They will, in the future they will, because we think of the Loch Ness monster, well, not actually, we used to, cause they actually took a diver, and it was just a large fish.

Robert: A long time ago, I mean in the future, they'll think we're stupid for going like, on "Unsolved Mysteries."

Allen: Ghosts.

Robert: UFOs.

Few students suggested things anything they themselves believed that might be considered senseless in the future; two students, however, thought people might not understand why people today believe in God, while two others suggested that race and gender relations may change for the worse, and that people in the future may not understand why we consider blacks equal to whites or women equal to men.

Furthermore, although many students were able to understand *that* beliefs were different in the past, they were uncertain *why* those beliefs were different. Tina's students were very interested in all discussions of why people believed in witchcraft, and some continued to puzzle about it after the class was over—even seeking Tina out to talk about it. During one class discussion, Darren and several other students wanted to know why they believed in witches in the first place—where the belief came from. As Darren said, "Did a person just make up the word, and then make up a meaning to go with it?" Greg asked, "Why would the devil be in so many people back then, and nobody now? Did he just run out of juice?"

Attempts by students to link differences in values to other aspects of society in the past were rare. One of the few attempts to do so was Angie's, who in the following interview explained why people in the past may have been so scornful of laziness:

Angie: Well, back then I think their attitudes were different cause if you didn't have the work done, then you might not make as much money, and you have to have money to live sort of, so they'd probably be like, if we don't get this done, then, you'll be grounded or something, if it was their kid's job.

Interviewer: And why has that changed?

Angie: Well, now, we also have more money now, but also things around the house that we do don't make as much money as they did before, cause we don't like make candles, cause then they would probably say, you have to have those candles done by a certain time, but now we don't make candles a lot in our houses, so it doesn't really matter if we get them done.

In addition, students sometimes explained the belief in witches by referring to the broader context. In explaining why people believed in witches, Amy had emphasized that people at the time explained natural phenomena that they did not understand—earthquakes, disease,

and so on—in religious terms, and many students then also pointed to this as the reason for the belief in witches. During one interview, Kenny and Amber also noted the social sanction for such beliefs:

Interviewer: Why do you think people a long time ago believed in witches?

Kenny: Same reason we, maybe

Amber: Believe in the tooth fairy or something like that.

Interviewer: Why?

Kenny: They were taught that, and whatever you're taught

Amber: You stick with it. It's hard not to, not believe.

The range of students' understanding also become clear during a discussion in Amy's room one day near the end of the year. The class had been discussing how women's roles had changed since the Colonial Era, and Travis asked why a man would have his wife punished for talking back to him: "Why would he marry her if he's gonna take her out to do that?" Similarly, Jenny asked, "Why didn't men *see* that wives cooked all their food, did all their laundry, and that if not for their wives, they couldn't eat, go to work, or anything?" Amy explained that it was a tradition—it had always been that way, and women had never been put in a position where they had power or rights. Jenny then asked, "Do you think if it hadn't been for these women who stood up for their rights, do you think it would be the same way today, and women wouldn't have the same rights as men?" Amy rephrased the question to the class, adding, "I couldn't have been a teacher, and you wouldn't have been able to go to school, and you wouldn't have done anything about it." Relying on their own contemporary perspective, though, several girls said with feeling, "I would have!" When I asked them whether they thought they would have protested if they had been alive then, Brittany said, "I would have fought for women's rights, because it wouldn't have been fair to us." Jenny, though, pointed out, "You can't answer right away; women wouldn't have as many rights as now." Similarly, Nichole said, "I don't think I would have because I like people to like me and not be my enemy";

Jenny added, "I don't think I would have either, I would have just stayed home. I think I would *today*, but back then, I don't think I would have."

Just as when writing letters about witchcraft, these students understood that attitudes were different in the past. Again, however, some were puzzled how any rational person could have held such beliefs—why would a man marry someone if he's going to punish her for talking back to him, and why didn't men see that women were important? Similarly, several girls could not imagine *themselves* entertaining such attitudes—if they were alive in the Colonial Era, *they* would have protested their treatment. Others, meanwhile, recognized that "you can't answer right away"—they realized that their attitudes would also have been different if they were alive then.

The range of responses is not due simply to differences among students. Individual students displayed different perspective–taking achievements at different times (a phenomenon also noted by Ashby and Lee, 1987). Characterizing any individual student as thinking at a single level would misportray the range of explanations each entertained. One group of students, for example, suggested that names have improved over time along with everything else; as one girl said, "You don't want a really beautiful girl, and her name is Flossie, or a really cute boy, and his name is Oliver." But when asked whether there were no cute boys in the past, they immediately reversed themselves and explained that the names would have sounded good at the time. Similarly, during the discussion of gender roles in the Colonial Era, Jenny one minute asked why men didn't see how important their wives were, and the next minute pointed out that if she were alive then she would have acted differently than she would now.

One of the most striking examples of this variation occurred one day when I asked a small group of students why they thought people in Salem would have believed the girls who made accusations of witchcraft. Heather first pointed out, "People were very stupid back then and probably believed everything a kid said." After thinking about it a few second, she added that it was "because they didn't have enough evidence, enough books to

know there weren't witches, and nowadays we have things to tell us there aren't witches." A moment later she went on to say, "They didn't know there was such a thing as smallpox killing animals, so they would make up a reason." Within the course of two minutes, Heather offered explanations that ranged from the naïve to the sophisticated. Moreover, her facial expressions suggested that her explanations were less directed at me than at herself; she appeared to be struggling with herself to make sense of the situation, and trying out various explanations to see which she found most convincing.

Discussion

Ashby and Lee (1987) describe five levels of empathetic understanding. Students at the lowest level see the past as unintelligible, and consider people in the past mentally defective for not having adopted obviously better courses of action; for these students, the past is a catalog of absurd behavior. At a somewhat higher level, students understand people with reference to generalized stereotypes; they explain actions in terms of what they think a very religious person would have done, for example, but without any attempt to place actions in a specific historical context or to differentiate the knowledge and beliefs of people now from those in the past. At the third level, that of "everyday empathy," students understand actions in terms of the specific situation in which people found themselves, but still fail to distinguish how we would see the situation in the present and how contemporaries saw it; they thus try to imagine how they themselves would have reacted in a given situation, rather than how people at the time would have. At the fourth level, students recognize that people would not necessarily have characterized their situations in the same terms as we would, because their beliefs, goals, and values were different than ours; students at this level tend to focus narrowly on specific situations, however. Only at the fifth and highest level do students place actions within the broader context of other differences in beliefs, values, and material conditions within historical societies.

Seen in light of this typology, one of the most striking characteristics of the students in the present study is that their thinking so quickly moved into higher levels. Although many began the school year at the lowest level—thinking that people in the past knew they were being old–fashioned or were too stupid to figure out how to mow over grave markers—they quickly began to recognize that people had a different outlook than we do today. Students confidently explained that in the past people would not have considered their fashions strange, their homes dirty, or their music slow. This ability of most students to differentiate the attitudes of people in the past from their own places them at the second highest level of Ashby's and Lee's typology.

Less often did students move beyond that point. At the highest level of Ashby's and Lee's typoloy, students place the actions of people in the past into wider contexts of belief or material conditions. In a similar fashion, Downey (1995) points to the importance of seeing past perspectives as part of a causal chain—being able to explain what led to those perspectives and how they affected people's actions. A few students suggested such causal or contextual explanations—as when Angie linked scorn for laziness to the requirements of home economy—but most continued to be somewhat puzzled by people's ability to hold perspectives so different than their own. Some suggested that people would have been easily dissuaded from their ideas, while others thought that if they were alive in the past, they would not have shared the beliefs of others. And while students agreed that people in the future will consider students' own beliefs unusual, they had trouble identifying examples. In each case, it was the larger context which was missing from students' understanding—they did not fully see what leads to patterns of beliefs and ideas. Greg's question—"Why would the Devil be in so many people back then, and nobody now? Did he just run out of juice?"—aptly characterizes their thinking: they understood *that* beliefs were different but did not fully understand *why*.

Research in other areas of children's cognition provides some insight into students' strengths and weaknesses in taking the perspective of people in the past. On the one hand,

studies of preschoolers indicate that children as young as three or four recognize that other people may have thoughts, beliefs, desires, and emotions that are different than their own; this kind of intuitive psychology may even be a "core domain" of human thought (Wellman and Gelman, 1992). It is not surprising, therefore, that students came quickly to understand and accept that people in the past did not believe the same things they do. Research on elementary students' comprehension and recall of narratives, however, indicates that even though they consider the internal states and responses of characters important, these are among the most poorly recalled aspects of stories (Mandler and Johnson, 1977; Mandler, et al., 1980; Nezworski, Stein, and Trabasso, 1982; Stein and Glenn, 1979). Working out the specifics of people's attitudes and beliefs is clearly more difficult than simply knowing that they are important and may be different than one's own. Understanding the internal states of other people is a life–long challenge even for adults, and Gardner (1983) goes to far as to suggest that it may constitute a separate intelligence.

The research reported here (as well as that of Downey, 1995, and Ashby and Lee, 1987), points to a number of important instructional considerations. First, teachers need to devote explicit attention to historical perspective–taking. Students had given little thought to the topic at the beginning of the year, and their initial explanations focused on the ignorance or stupidity of people in the past. Had their teachers not asked them to consider the topic more carefully, students may have continued to misundersand many historical actions. In Amy's and Tina's classes, though, students moved beyond their initial ideas and began to understand the past from the perspective of people alive at the time.

Perspective–taking, however, cannot be a brief or superficial aspect of instruction. Amy and Tina focused students' attention on the topic throughout the year, as they explained how beliefs were different, led students in group discussions of those differences, and assigned a variety of activities—compositions, role–plays, simulations, debates—which required students to try to take on those perspectives. Even with such thorough attention, students struggled to make sense of past beliefs, and often alternated

between their own perspectives and those they were learning about. Helping students understanding the basis for historical perspectives—the social and cultural cirumstances that lead to particular sets of ideas, beliefs, and attitudes—is particularly crucial. Developing sophisticated understandings of historical perspectives is a difficult task, and students cannot be expected to develop such understanding without sustained instruction.

Finally, attention to perspective-taking should take place within the context of meaningful, interactive activities. Students' most thoughtful considerations occurred when they worked with others on tasks that required them to *use* information on historical perspectives. While working with their teachers or in groups, students often discussed the nature and implications of past perspectives, and their understanding became more complete and nuanced as the discussion progressed (cf. Ashby and Lee, 1987). Preparing for activities in which they placed themselves in the past—by playing the part of immigrants at Ellis Island, for example, or creating a simulation of a witch trial in Salem village—also required students to pay careful attention to specific features of past ideas, beliefs, and attitudes. Such active forms of engagement with historical information seem particularly likely to engage students in thoughtful consideration of past perspectives.

Summary

Students in this study were just beginning to understand how the values, attitudes, and beliefs of people in the past were different than those today. Although some students initially attributed past behavior to deficiencies of intelligence or education, most came quickly to understand that people in the past had different outlooks than people today, and that their own perspectives may someday seem old-fashioned as well. Students had little trouble accepting, for example, that fashions that seem unusual now were considered attractive in the past. When it came to more fundamental differences in beliefs or values, students also recognized that people in the past were different, but had much more

difficulty accounting for those differences. Many students could not quite accept they would have shared such outlooks if they were alive in the past, and only occasionally did students place them in a broader cultural perspective. Their active attempts to make sense of these differences, though, suggests that historical perspective–taking is not beyond the ability of fourth and fifth graders, and that they benefit from meaningful and sustained attention to the topic.

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[1] This attention is due in part to the influence of the British historian R. G. Collingwood, who argued that in order to know the past, historians must re–enact past experience by putting themselves in the place of those whom they study (Collingwood, 1969).

[2] With their consent, I have used the teachers' real names. All students' names have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect their privacy and that of their families.

[3] Other topics in history came up outside the time set aside for formal history instruction. Near the Martin Luther King, Jr., holiday, for example, both classes watched and discussed a video on the history of the Civil Rights movement. Historical fiction was also a prevalent part of students' experience, as a part of both formal reading instruction and their own independent reading.

[4] The appendix contains a full description of the task, including interview questions and descriptions of the pictures. I conducted four series of interviews, spread throughout the school year, which involved thirty–three students (twenty–two fourth–graders and eleven fifth–graders). Eleven students were interviewed three times each, three twice, and nineteen once, for a total of twenty–nine interviews. The gender imbalance among fourth–graders in these classes, combined with their expectation of most of them that they would be interviewed, led to a greater proportion of males being interviewed. However, equal numbers of males and females were interviewed multiple times.

[5] While educational researchers often take the role of *non*participant observers who attempt to position themselves unobtrusively and not interfere with instruction, I took a much more active role. In addition to working with Amy and Tina to plan lessons and locate resources, I frequently taught or cotaught lessons. Even more frequently, I interjected comments, questions, and observations while Amy and Tina were teaching—a practice which they actively encouraged and which fit well with the discussion–oriented nature of their instruction and with the generally open feeling of their classes. When students were engaged in individual or group work I often took on the same role as Amy and Tina—probing students' understanding, asking them questions about the way they carried out the assignment, and providing them with the help they needed.

[6] This total does not include time spent in interviews. History was typically scheduled for an hour a day, three days a week, and I tried always to be there at the times it was scheduled. Over the course of the year, I attended approximately eighty percent of the class sessions devoted to history. Special projects often began earlier or extended later than scheduled, and I tried to remain for those times whenever possible. I also accompanied the classes on three field trips related to history.

[7] Students' writing provided less insight into their thinking than either interviews or classroom participation. These compositions were based on the content they had begun learning while I was present, but the writing and revising usually took place after I left. As a result, I saw the outcome of the assignments but not the process that produced them. In addition, many compositions went into portfolios, were sent home, or (in the case of first drafts) were relegated to the trash can before I saw them. Compositions nonetheless provided a source of triangulation for other data, since students' writing did not reveal patterns inconsistent with those identified from interviews or classroom participation. Greater use of written assignments in future research would require a systematic method of collection and analysis that would not interfere with the instructional needs of teachers and students.

[8] The spelling of names does change over time due to illiteracy, but students assumed that their own names were spelled correctly, and that any variation in the past must simply be a mistake.

[9] Except where otherwise noted, I have transcribed students' compositions without changing their spelling or punctuation.

[10] The very application of the word "weird" to the people of the past masked a range of understanding on the part of students. While working on projects related to names, for example, one group of boys repeatedly referred to older names as being "weird," even as they pointed out that the names did not sound weird then and that some day their own names might sound weird. In an example is not exclusively historical, students researching changes in money came across a picture of money burned in China for one's ancestors. Ryan at first said that was "stupid." Aaron said that it wasn't stupid, because it was just their religion; Ryan said he guessed it was "just like a tradition," and so was not really stupid after all, "just weird."

[11] In transcribing interviews, I have tried to capture as completely as possible the content and form of the original conversations (although I have omitted sounds like "uh" and "um" without notation whenever they were used by the students or myself). I have marked the deletion of words or phrases within a student's response with a bracketed ellipsis ([...]); deletion of entire student responses within an excerpt is marked by a bracketed ellipsis between lines. Completed responses by students end with a period, while those which were interrupted by another student or myself have no period at the end. An unbracketed ellipsis at the end of a response indicates that the student's inflection suggested he or she had more to say but that he or she did not complete the statement.

[12] This student's attempt to write a dialogue was a noble one, but the inconsistency of his use of quotation marks makes for difficult reading; as a result, I have changed some punctuation in order to make it clear when the dialogue shifts from one person to the next.

[13] Interestingly, what students did in these examples was attribute to people in the future the same limited perspective–taking ability they themselves had demonstrated earlier in the year: just as they initially couldn't understand why people would have done such manifestly "old–fashioned" things in the past, they thought people in the future wouldn't understand why people in 1994 used cars instead of more advanced forms of transportation.

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